

Westchester County Center opens as one of NY's first mass vaccine sites

"These sites are the light at the end of the tunnel." -Basil Seggos, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation.

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Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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WHITE PLAINS – Janet Bedin was smiling under her mask Wednesday as she left the Westchester County Center, where she'd gotten her first dose of the coronavirus vaccine.

"You felt like you could take a deep breath," Bedin said of getting the shot. "And it was just like: we're almost there."

Bedin and her friend Vito Verni were among the first few hundred to get the vaccine at the center, which opened Wednesday as one of the first three mass COVID-19 vaccination sites in New York State.

Are you eligible for the vaccine? [Sign up here or call 833-NYS-4-VAX](#)

With limited availability of doses and millions of New Yorkers now eligible to receive them, many have reported difficulty booking an appointment with crashed websites and trouble getting through on the phone.

But Verni was surprised at how smooth and quick the process was at the center, which left him encouraged for the end of the global pandemic.

"We need to get as many people vaccinated as quickly as possible," he said. "We're slowly getting to that point."

The state opened the County Center, the Jacob Javits Center in New York City and the Expo Center at the Fairgrounds in Syracuse as its first three mass vaccination sites.

Additional sites will open later this week at Jones Beach on Long Island and the University of Albany in the Capital Region, said Basil Seggos, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation.

“These sites are the light at the end of the tunnel,” Seggos told reporters at a Wednesday news conference at the County Center.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo will announce more sites in the coming days, Seggos said.

“Gov. Cuomo’s goal is to be the first state in the nation to be COVID free and these sites are the vehicle in which we will arrive at the destination,” Seggos said.

More than 7 million New Yorkers are now eligible to receive the vaccine under current guidelines, but the state is receiving roughly 300,000 doses per week. Unless the supply is increased to the state, it would take six months to vaccinate those eligible.

Seggos called on the federal government to "step up in a significant way" to increase vaccine distribution to New York and other states.

Monday was the first day teachers and people 75 years and older could sign up for the vaccine after Cuomo said Friday he would widen eligibility in the face of a slow statewide rollout.

On Tuesday, he again widened the net of people who could receive a vaccine, including people 65 years and older.

Seggos asked for those trying to get appointments to be patient and understand that the limits meant it could be months before an eligible person gets an appointment.

“We are building the plane while we’re flying it,” Seggos said. "This is an incredible undertaking that none of us has ever experienced.”

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The county center, owned and operated by Westchester County, is home to the development league Westchester Knicks and usually hosts trade shows and concerts.

But during the first wave of the coronavirus last spring, it was converted by the federal government into an emergency hospital with 110 beds for \$42.9 million. It was never used as an overflow hospital because the county's roughly 2,600 hospital-bed capacity never hit its limit.

After sitting idle for months, the center was buzzing with activity again on Wednesday as those with appointments made their way through the front entrance past masked Army guards.

Inside, where there would usually be a basketball court were hallways, rooms and offices. People were screened, given a shot — it was the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine — and then observed by medical professionals for up to a half hour for any possible reaction.

Workers set an appointment for the needed second "booster" dose of the vaccine and handed out reminder cards to people after they finished up inside.

Nermin Epperson of Bronxville held her card as she left the center.

"I feel good," Epperson said. "I can't wait for my second shot, then I'm all ready to go."

Those eligible for an appointment can sign up [here](#) or call 833-NYS-4-VAX.

Mark Lungariello covers government and politics. Follow him on Facebook [@lungariello](#) and Twitter [@marklungariello](#).